

Says: Teens and Oral Sex

Highlights

- Just over half of teens (aged 15-19) have had oral sex.
- About one in four teens (aged 15-19) who have *not* had sexual intercourse report they have had oral sex. For older teens (aged 18-19) the proportion is even higher.
- Older teens (about seven in ten of those aged 18-19) are much more likely than younger teens (about four in ten of those aged 15-17) to have had oral sex.
- Oral sex among teens (aged 15-19) is now more common than sexual intercourse.
- Among teen boys (aged 15-19) who have not had sexual intercourse, the proportion of those who say they have had oral sex did *not* increase between 1995 and 2002. Among teen boys who have had sexual intercourse, the proportion of those who say they have had oral sex increased from 82% in 1995 to 88% in 2002.

Trend data for teen girls are not available.

Introduction

The issue of teens and oral sex has received a great deal of attention over the past several years. For example, television shows, newspaper articles, magazine covers, and even books of fiction for young teens have all focused on the topic. Some have posited that teens are having oral sex at younger ages while others have suggested that oral sex is now viewed as a non-intimate, casual activity for most teens. Still others have speculated that teens who have *not* had sex¹ are having oral sex instead to retain their "virgin status." For the most part, however, discussions about teens and oral sex have been based on anecdotal evidence rather than science-based information. The reason for this is simple: to date there has been very little reliable data on teens and oral sex.

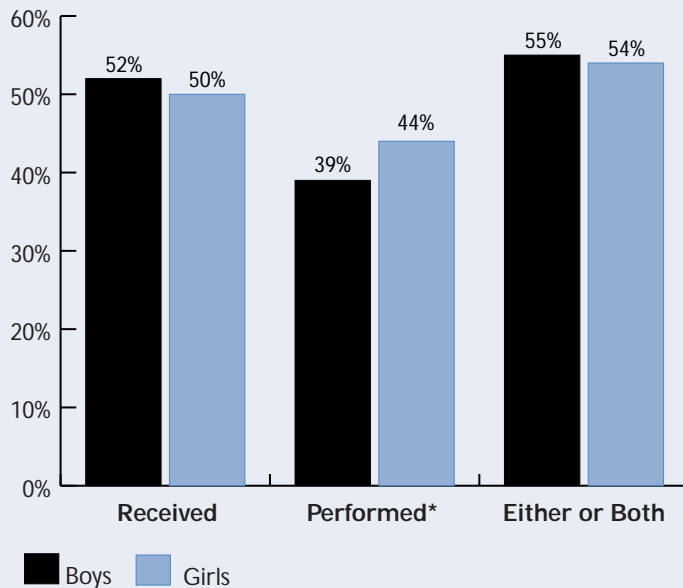
This analysis attempts to answer some of the questions surrounding

teens and oral sex using data from the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG)—the premier source of national information on teen sexual behavior. The NSFG surveys people aged 15-44. This *Science Says* research brief focuses on those aged 15-19. All data reported here is for 2002 unless otherwise noted. Readers should note three important limitations on the data: (1) Trend data is only available for boys, (2) the data does not allow us to specifically determine what age teens first had oral sex (the question posed to respondents aged 15-19 was whether they had *ever* had oral sex), and (3) the data also does not make clear the exact sequence of sexual behavior.

Some may wonder why an organization whose mission is to prevent teen pregnancy is focusing on the topic of teens and oral sex at all. There are three primary reasons why we are examining this issue. First, as a research-based organization, it is important for us to help separate fact from fiction on a series of questions we are asked all the

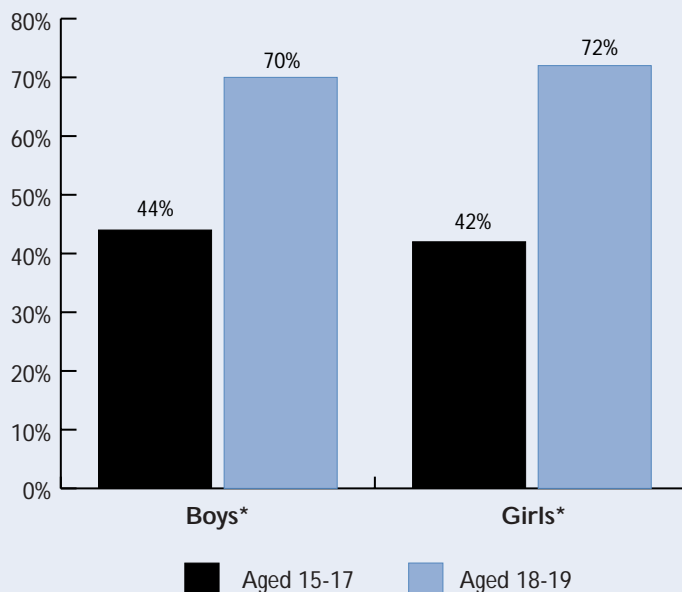
¹ For the purposes of this brief "sex" and "sexual intercourse" refers to vaginal sexual intercourse. Oral sex refers to a teen who has received oral sex from, or given oral sex to (or both), an opposite-sex partner.

FIGURE 1: Percent of teens (aged 15-19) who report having received or performed oral sex



* - boy-girl difference statistically significant ($p \leq .05$).

FIGURE 2: Difference by age in the percent of teens who report having given or received oral sex



* - age difference statistically significant ($p \leq .05$).

time. Second, as this *Science Says* research brief makes clear, nearly all teens who have had sexual intercourse have also had oral sex. Consequently, it is reasonable to conclude that most teens who have had oral sex are more likely to be at risk for getting pregnant or causing a pregnancy than young people who have not had oral sex (even though the exact sequencing of teens' sexual behavior is not known). Finally, of course, it is also the case that teens who have oral sex are at varying degrees of contracting sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)—an issue of critical concern to the health and well-being of adolescents.

Teens and Oral Sex: 1995-2002

Teen boys and girls are equally likely to have had oral sex.

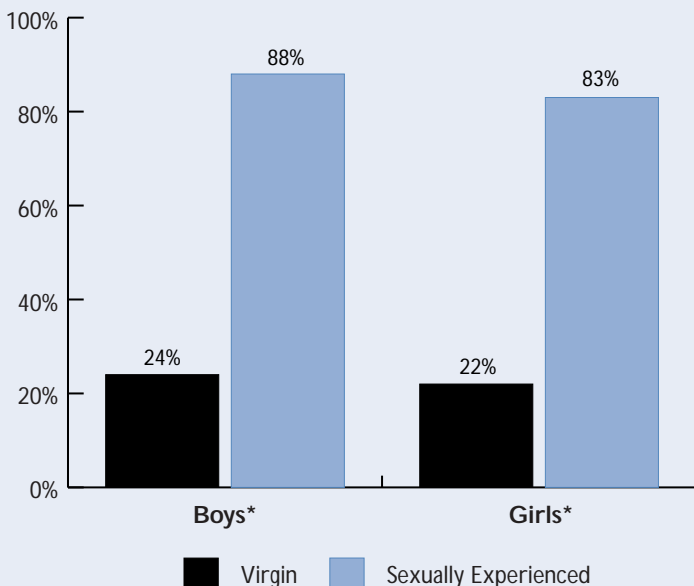
Just over half of teens aged 15-19—54% of girls and 55% of boys—say they've had oral sex (Figure 1).²

Experience with oral sex increases with age.

Teens aged 18-19 are much more likely than those aged 15-17 to have had oral sex. Less than half of those aged 15-17 (42% of girls and 44% of boys) report they have had oral sex. Among those aged 18-19, about seven in ten (70% of boys and 72% of girls) say they have had oral sex (Figure 2). The differences between older and younger teens

² Please note that percentages have been rounded up to the nearest whole number and those who answered "unknown" to questions were excluded from the analysis.

FIGURE 3: Percent of virgin and sexually experienced teens who have received or performed oral sex, by gender



are statistically significant^A for both boys and girls.

Among teens, oral sex is now more common than sexual intercourse.

In 2002, less than half of teens aged 15-19 (53% of girls and 49% of boys)^B say they have had sexual intercourse.^C By comparison, more than half of teens aged 15-19 (54% of girls and 55% of boys) report having had oral sex in 2002.

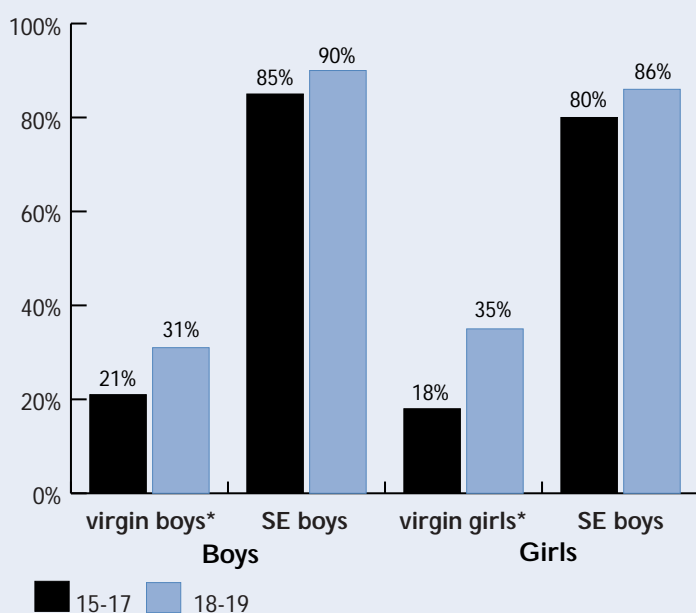
A considerable percentage of teens who have *not* had sexual intercourse have had oral sex.

Almost one quarter of teens aged 15-19 who have *not* had sexual intercourse (24% of boys and 22% of girls) have had oral sex (Figure 3). Younger virgins are significantly less likely to have had oral sex than older virgins. Among virgin boys aged 15-17, 21% report having had oral sex compared with 31% of virgin boys aged 18-19. Among virgin girls aged 15-17, 18% say they have had oral sex compared to 35% of virgin girls aged 18-19.

Among teen boys who have had sexual intercourse, oral sex increased between 1995 and 2002. Among teen boys who have not had sexual intercourse, oral sex has not increased.

Oral sex questions were included in the NSFG survey for the first time in 2002. However, data from the 1995 National Survey of Adolescent

FIGURE 4: Percent of virgin and sexually experienced teens who have had oral sex (given or received), by age



Males (NSAM) is available to compare the proportion of teen boys who have had oral sex between 1995 and 2002. Comparative data for teen girls before 2002 is not available. The proportion of teen boys who have had sexual intercourse and who also report having had oral sex increased significantly from 82% in 1995 to 88% in 2002. The proportion of never-married virgin boys aged 15-19 who have had oral sex increased from 19% in 1995 to 24% in 2002. This increase is not considered statistically significant.

Nearly all teens who have had sexual intercourse have also had oral sex.

Among teens (aged 15-19) who have had sex, more than eight in ten (88% of boys and 83% of girls) say they have also had oral sex. Among sexually experienced teens,

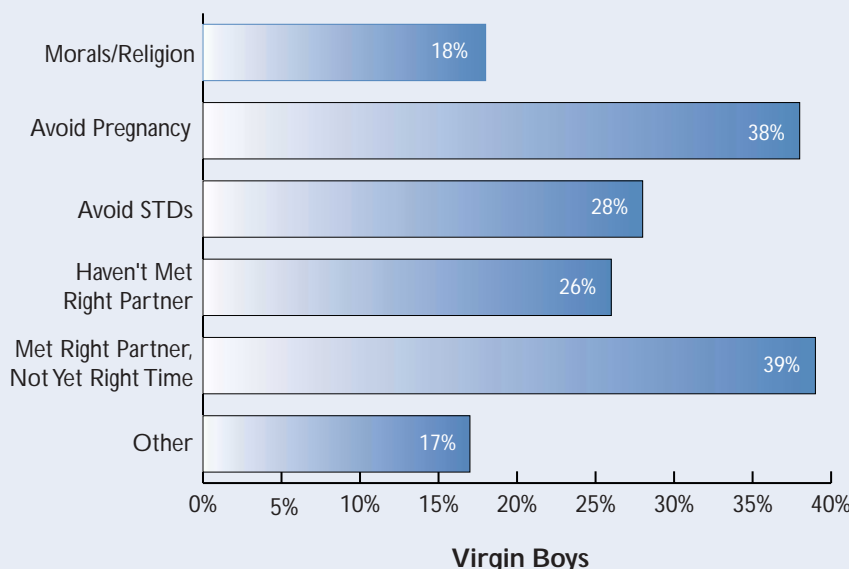
younger teens (80% girls and 85% boys of those aged 15-17) are less likely to have had oral sex than older teens (86% girls and 90% boys aged 18-19, Figure 4).

Possible reasons why sexually inexperienced^D teens have oral sex.

Although the NSFG does not directly ask teens why they have had oral sex, sexually inexperienced teens are asked why they have not had sexual intercourse. Combining these data with data on the prevalence of oral sex provides us with some indirect evidence as to why teens who have not had sexual intercourse have had oral sex (Figures 5 and 6). Virgin boys and virgin girls who have had oral sex have been asked why they have postponed sexual intercourse. Their responses cluster as follows:

- Of those teens who say the primary reason they have not had sexual intercourse is because it isn't the "right time," even though they have met the "right partner", almost one in four (37% of girls and 39% of boys) have had oral sex.
- Of those teens who say the primary reason they have not had sexual intercourse is because they wanted to avoid getting pregnant or causing a pregnancy, about one third (31% of girls and 38% of boys) have had oral sex.
- Of those teens who say the primary reason they have not had sexual intercourse is because they want to avoid STDs, over a quarter (26% of girls and 28% of boys) have had oral sex.
- Of those teens who say the primary reason they have not had sexual intercourse is because they have not met the right partner, over a quarter (31% of girls and 26% of boys) have had oral sex.
- Of those teens who say the primary reason they have not had sexual intercourse is because they have not met the right partner, over a quarter (31% of girls and 26% of boys) have had oral sex.
- Of those teens who provide some other reason for postponing sexual intercourse, about one in five (20% of girls and 17% of boys) have had oral sex.

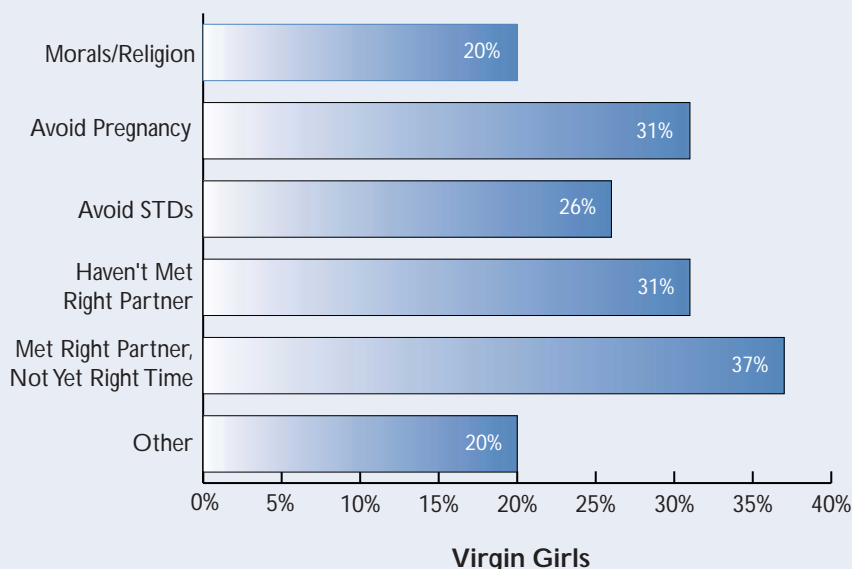
FIGURE 5: Proportion of virgin boys who have had oral sex, by main reason for postponing sexual intercourse



What It All Means

Separating fact and fiction. After much anecdotal speculation about teens and oral sex—in particular

FIGURE 6: Proportion of virgin girls who have had oral sex, by main reason for postponing sexual intercourse



whether sexually inexperienced teens are "saving" their virginity by having oral sex—the media, parents, educators, those who work directly with teens, and others now have reliable data on the topic. More than half of teens have had oral sex and it is now more likely that a teen has had oral sex than it is that he/she has had sexual inter-

course. Almost all of those who have had sexual intercourse have had oral sex (although we do not know the actual sequence of behavior). Moreover, about one in four teens who have *not* had sexual intercourse have had oral sex.

Parents. These data suggest that parents need to both broaden the

discussions they have with their children about sex and to be more specific. For example, if parents want their teens to abstain from sex, they may need to be specific about exactly what they want their children to abstain from. This may be a difficult task given previous research showing that parents both underestimate the influence they have over their children's decisions about sex and that they often fail to recognize that their adolescents are sexually experienced. In addition, parents freely admit that talking with their children about sex is awkward (see, for example, *Science Says #8: Parental Influence and Teen Pregnancy*).

Education. Too many teens view oral sex as "safe." Fully 28% of teens whose primary reason for not having sexual intercourse is to avoid STDs have had oral sex and less than 10% of teens report using a condom the last time they had oral sex. These data suggest that teens need to be better informed about the potential physical risks of engaging in oral sex.

Author Information

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About the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization supported largely by private donations. The National Campaign's mission is to improve the well-being of children, youth, and families by reducing teen pregnancy. The National Campaign celebrates its 10th anniversary in 2005. When we began in 1996, we set a goal of a one-third reduction in the teen pregnancy rate in ten years. Ten years later, it seems almost certain that the nation will reach this goal. Building on this great success, the National Campaign's new challenge to the nation for the next decade will be to reduce the teen pregnancy rate by *another* one-third.

Data Sources

All statistics for 2002 were generated with data from the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), a periodic national survey on fertility-related issues conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Because the 1995 cycle of the NSFG included females only, male statistics for 1995 were generated with data from the National Survey of Adolescent Males (NSAM), a national survey designed to parallel the NSFG. NSAM was conducted by staff at the Urban Institute, the University of Illinois, and Research Triangle Institute under grants from the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), National Institutes of Health, HHS. NICHD and the Office of Population Affairs, Maternal and Child Health Bureau, HHS provided additional funding to prepare the data sets for release to the public.

NSFG data sets on CD-ROM are available free of charge from NCHS: visit www.cdc.gov/nchs/nsfg.htm, call (301) 458-4222, or e-mail nsfg@cdc.gov for more information. NSAM data sets are available via Sociometrics Corporation's Data Archive on Adolescent Pregnancy and Pregnancy Prevention (product numbers O7 and P1-P4). For pricing information, visit www.socio.com or call (650) 949-3282.

Please Note: The NSFG has typically been conducted about every 7 years. According to NCHS, it plans to change to continuous data collection in 2006, interviewing about 4,000 people each year. With continuous interviewing, adequate data for analysis will be available for populations such as teens after two years of data collection. NCHS expects that by late 2008 or early 2009, data for about 1,500 to 1,600 teens will be available for research and analysis. Data for an additional 800 teens will be available by late 2009, bringing the sample size for teenagers to 2,400, compared with about 2,300 in the 2002 NSFG. With continuous interviewing, larger samples of teens can be combined for more in-depth analysis, and data will be available more frequently.

Notes

A For those unfamiliar with the term "statistical significance," this refers to the results of statistical testing to measure whether observed differences between groups (boys versus girls, older versus younger teens, etc) are true differences in attitudes/behavior, or are due to the particular teens included in the survey, which is meant to be representative of the U.S. teen population. For the purposes of these analyses, the threshold for statistical significance is 0.05. That is, results are considered significant if the "p value" (or probability of the difference being just a random occurrence) is equal to or less than 5%. Differences referred to as being "close to statistically signifi-

cant" have P values between 0.06 and 0.10.

- B Please note that the proportion of teens who have had sexual intercourse are slightly different than previously reported percentages due to the fact that the measure of sexual intercourse was slightly different (see note below).
- C For boys, having had sexual intercourse is defined as having been married, having cohabited with a female, or having answered yes to the following question: "have you ever put your penis in a female's vagina (also known as vaginal intercourse)?" For girls, having had sexual intercourse is defined as having been married, having cohabited with a male, having been pregnant, or having answered yes to the following question: "Has a male ever put his penis in your vagina (also known as vaginal intercourse)?" "Virgins" are those who have never married, never cohabited, never been pregnant (girls only), and answered no to the question regarding having had sexual intercourse.
- D For this section: For boys, being "sexually experienced" is defined as having been married, having cohabited with a female, or having answered yes to the following question: "have you ever had sexual intercourse with a female (sometimes this is called making love, having sex, or going all the way)?" For girls, being "sexually experienced" is defined as having been married, having cohabited with a male, having been pregnant, or having answered yes to the following question: "at any time in your life, have you ever had sexual intercourse with a man, that is, made love, had sex, or gone all the way?" "Virgins" are those who have never married, never cohabited, never been pregnant (girls only), and answered no to the question regarding having had sexual intercourse.